

By Maricopa County Supervisor Don Stapley (R-District 2)
Chairman, Commission of Justice System Intervention for the Seriously Mentally Ill

The month of May is *National Mental Health Month*. While we might have turned the page on the calendar to another month, the issue remains front and center. Here in Arizona, we are dealing with recognizing mental health-related problems in our community, especially in our jails. The Maricopa County jail system has become the depository of our county's seriously mentally ill (SMI) population. That fact demonstrates the extent to which our safety net for this population is failing.

How are we addressing this issue? In December, the County Board of Supervisors created the Commission of Justice System Intervention for the Seriously Mentally Ill. The Commission was a result of the progress realized from a working group that began collaborating on this problem over eighteen months ago. We have received the full support and leadership of our county sheriff, Joe Arpaio, Presiding Judge-elect Barbara Mundell, as well as our county attorney, Andrew Thomas. The Maricopa County Probation Department, Correctional Health, the Arizona Department of Health Services, municipal law enforcement agencies, and Value Options also have been part of this team effort.

The current average population of the SMI in our jails is 2,099 representing 23.5% of the total jail population. We are spending \$5,038,350 annually on psychotropic drugs and the administration of those drugs. This cost has skyrocketed over the past three to five years, and is anticipated to continue to rise. The Commission's goal is to develop a more responsible and cost-effective system that integrates new treatment protocols and programs with existing service structure.

The scope of the Commission work is focused on the following areas:

- Identifying and addressing pre-booking diversion opportunities so that those with mental illness do not enter the correctional system unless absolutely necessary.
- Strengthening our "mental health" court programs.
- Developing better "in custody" treatment programs, including a new proposal developed by the Sheriff's office modeled after the highly successful substance abuse program, called the *Alpha II Program*.
- Addressing the "loss of entitlements" problem that exists when Medicaid-eligible SMI detainees automatically lose all benefits upon booking.
- Directing more focus on the re-entry process as inmates are released from jail, including issues such as continuity of medications, treatment and transitional housing and better coordination with the State Behavioral Health providers and other community based non-profit providers. Our county is woefully lacking even some of these basic needs for the SMI population as is evident from the above-mentioned statistics.

The task is truly daunting, but the partners addressing this crisis are dedicated, compassionate and results-oriented public servants who deserve a lot of credit. Progress will come, but it will take time and more resources. The experience of other jurisdictions has shown that the Commission's efforts can establish a system that is more humane to the mentally ill in our community while saving taxpayer dollars. Several studies exist that clearly demonstrate that for every dollar spent in this kind of effort, \$7 to \$12 dollars can be saved from what it now costs the county, cities and state.

Here in Maricopa County, we are looking to pioneer new systems that will allow us to more humanely and effectively manage the mentally ill we find now on our streets and in our jails. At the same time we hope to divert those who don't belong in jail to more appropriate services.